

Bennett rails against state budget impasse

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- Written by Joe Boyle

Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett listens as speakers discuss employee benefits and financial planning during the Southwest Conference of Mayors meeting held last month at The Bridge Teen Center in Orland Park.

Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett sees no end in sight to break the budget impasse deadlock in Springfield that is closing in on a second year.

“Nothing has changed on the state budget,” said Bennett. “The magic continues down there (Springfield). I don’t know if we can have a budget this year.”

Bennett provided a report on the budget during a Southwest Conference of Mayors meeting March 29 at The Bridge Teen Center in Orland Park. Bennett, who serves as the president of the Southwest Conference of Mayors, was just one of a few mayors in attendance. Several mayors were not present because they were campaigning for the April 4 consolidated election.



“From the people I have talked to, we might not see a budget until after the 2018 election,” said Bennett, who was unopposed in the April 4 election. “I hope I’m wrong about that but I don’t see anything happening right now.”

Mayors who were in attendance did not disagree with Bennett’s assessment. At that point, Bennett switched gears and discussed the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning funding. Andy Plummer, a consultant for the RTA, provided a report on CMAP that he said is facing reductions due to the budget impasse.

“We want to submit as many projects as we can,” said Plummer. “We want to be proactive because these (projects) are going to be done with Phase 1 funding.”

The legislation creating CMAP called for the agency to produce a comprehensive land use and transportation plan for the southwest suburban region. It would also provide a funding source to enable CMAP to perform its duties. But the budget implementation bill has dissolved this funding. Bennett said the issue has to be addressed to ensure that CMAP has a funding source to effectively implement future programs.

The Southwest Conference of Mayors supports the passage of House Bill 6286 and Senate Bill 2966. Both bills seek to reestablish the Comprehensive Regional Planning Fund, which was dissolved in 2011.

In terms of the Regional Transportation Authority funding, Plummer said money is becoming scarce.

“We had about \$400 million from the (former Gov. Pat) Quinn administration,” said Plummer. “We are now approaching our limit. The RTA CMAP projects were on hiatus last year. We are going to reintroduce it again this year on May 5.”

During the meeting that lasted just over an hour, the board discussed pension reform and protecting municipal revenue. The Southwest Conference of Mayors encourages the General Assembly to address and reform the pensions of current public safety employees. The goal, according to the mayors, is to develop longer term, comprehensive solutions that protect local taxpayers and secure sustainable retirement benefits for all public safety

employees.

Bennett said the Illinois General Assembly should take immediate action to consolidate the over 650 individual public safety pension funds into the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund or a similar single multiple employer pension system.

"The best way to get pension relief is to have a single consolidation state fund," Bennett said.

The mayors also urge for the protection against any further efforts to erode municipal revenue sources, especially the share of the state income tax and the one percent local portion of the sales tax.

"The state must refrain from withholding, freezing, diverting, delaying or reducing any state-collected local revenue streams," Bennett said. "If local revenue is withheld in any way, municipalities will be forced to cut essential services, raise property taxes or layoff critical staff to cover this loss."

Bennett said that this would be harmful to taxpaying residents and businesses throughout the state.

Other local mayors who attended the meeting were Bob Straz (Palos Heights) and Mike Howley (Hickory Hills).